Workshop "Digital Activism in Times of Pandemic, Disinformation and Post-truth" at the 24th Forum 2000 Conference "A New World Emerging? Restoring Responsibility and Solidarity"

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Virtual meeting
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Digital technologies play an important role during the global pandemic, even though authoritarian governments are limiting the internet access to their citizens. To fight disinformation and censorship of illiberal regimes is a central issue. Denouncing fake accounts and hate-spreaders can be a positive start, and so is strengthening a sense of common-global responsibility, fostered by digital activism and based on everybody's access to education. Avoiding public polarization, fighting authoritarian censorship and targeting fake news fabricators are capital challenges.

1. How to increase impact of digital activism?

With digitalization – and its opportunities and threats – democracy activists must reimagine and reframe their strategies. Protests all over the world have recently gone digital, but how can we better use social media and digital resources to promote democracy and values?

1.1. Challenges to digital activism:

- Authoritarianism: COVID-19 empowered authoritarian regimes in certain countries and illiberal democracies started tracing and controlling citizens with the excuse of security. Many autocracies control social media and their country's Internet-providers, they monitor and censor information undermining their power, and flood the online space with disinformation and government propaganda.
- Violations of human rights by noxious floods of online disinformation used by autocracies as propaganda tools.
- The space should not be left to "noisemakers", unwilling to listen to the science and based on improvised and unreliable pieces of news.
- Fake news and disinformation should be tackled with legal tools; democratic process – such as political elections – should be closely monitored and protected against illegitimate (and sometimes foreign) interferences.
- Need to create a long-term global strategy and community open to new opportunities; promoting multimedia skills is imperative.
- Creating bonds and bridges between people – rediscovering shared important values beyond differences is a main feature of democracy: digital tools and digital activism can foster the global debate in a positive, multilateral direction.

1.2. Ideas to increase the impact of digital activism:

- Creation of one central medium to communicate the ideas might reduce the means of communication and create a stronger network of advocates and activists. There is a lot of noise in little platform which leads to the risk of creating a competition among these platforms. (example of Sri Lanka)
- Promotion of digital media and skills, training of activists and aim to professionalize – producing quality content is important to draw attention. Learning new social media and digital tools practices to reach wider audiences can raise public awareness on important policy issues.
- Combination of digital activism and 'activism on the ground' – focusing exclusively on digital activism leads to the risk of leaving out those who do not have access such infrastructures, social media should be used to go to the streets and make change in the real world.
- Strengthening pluralism of connection, ideas and thoughts is important both for enhancing digital activism and weakening authoritarian control. New technologies can not only spread reliable information, but also provide many opportunities for people to conceptualize new ideas, contents and hot issues, enhancing democracy.

2. How to fight disinformation and censorship by authoritarian regimes?

The spread of disinformation and fake news is a problem that is faced by countries worldwide and a conclusive strategy to tackle this issue is still to be found.

2.1. Different approaches to counter disinformation:

- Creation of a list of known disinformation websites created by independent organizations/NGOs as a source of existing fake news media and warning for their spreading. (Czechia)
- Cooperation/partnership between local factchecking organization and Facebook – local factchecking platforms help Facebook identify disinformation sites by reporting fake news they find on the platform. (Philippines)
- Creation of an independent media consul, where citizens can report disinformation media. The consul, formed by independent journalists and working as an NGO, creates an overall report to be shared in all media across the country. (Kosovo)
- Multilayered approach for addressing disinformation implemented on- and offline – challenging authoritarian leadership by working with people on the ground combined with WhatsApp groups and Facebook/Twitter campaigns (Nicaragua, Venezuela):
  - Creating specific Facebook campaigns in order to provide good examples to population as an alternative to increasing polarization (powerful messages to build in peace in a way that makes people think about their actions); creating groups focused on solving specific problems on community level and empowering the groups that are already active in the territory.
- Online app tracking disinformation and fake news which can confirm if the information is real or fake (in collaboration with journalists and legit news sources). (Sri Lanka)
- Disinformation websites often use similar language – identification of most common fake news expression and monitoring of the use of language common for fake news websites as a way of identifying disinformation media.
- Factchecking is a reactive method, but there is a need for a proactive approach, e.g. labeling safe internet areas by providing websites not spreading fake news with a certificate (however, this should not be done by the governments).

2.2. Most important takeaways:

- All situations and country contexts/infrastructure are different and need different approaches.
- There is a great responsibility for journalists and media, but also for individuals to not take all information for granted and to keep asking themselves questions about the information they are facing.
- Major steps can be made in the fight against disinformation by ensuring access to quality education, as this can guide individuals in avoiding the overwhelming amount of resources for fake news that are present in the modern world.
- What is currently still lacking is a shared vision on how to face the threats of disinformation. The restrictions that some authoritarian regimes have implemented as a response to the situation concerning COVID-19 has made this challenge more urgent.